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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0223
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3347
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1163
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1031
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1600
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2191
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000192

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: 500 SATELLITE TV CHANNELS FOR
EVERY CITIZEN -- A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT?

REF: A. 07 ASHGABAT 1325

[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 0023

[1](#)1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

[1](#)2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Work continues in Ashgabat to provide standardize satellite-television access for all citizens. The government recently provided further detail on the process of replacing the private satellite dishes on almost every apartment balcony, calling the project a sign of progress. It remains to be seen whether the authorities will want to make use of their control over satellite access in the future to limit programming, but so far they have not. In fact, they are trumpeting that citizens will now have access to about 500 global stations, rather than the previous [1](#)20. If true, this would be a remarkable opening of the information space in Turkmenistan. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)3. (U) On January 28, Turkmen television aired a meeting Communications Minister Hojagurbanow held with mid-level officials, where the Minister explained in further detail President Berdimuhamedov's decision to remove unsightly private satellite dishes from apartment balconies. He also explained the process by which the Ministry is undertaking the work. He said that single, high-capacity dishes would be installed on each residential building so that all residents will have access both to national channels and some 500 foreign television channels.

[1](#)4. (SBU) On January 31, "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" spelled out the benefits of the changeover, noting "residents will no longer have to find satellite repair people to connect up or install dishes, because government specialists from Turkmentelecom will do everything themselves." The newspaper reported that connecting to the system will be free, and then Turkmentelecom will charge a monthly fee of 12,000 manat (about \$2 at the official exchange rate) for access. the article pointed out this new satellite access will be not only for those living in "elite, white-marble heights, but for everyone." The first stage of the project is to be completed by the end of February, and will establish the new

service in some 50 residential buildings. The second stage of the project will involve another 50 buildings.

PRESIDENT ORDERS SPEED-UP

15. (U) The president on February 2 asked the Ministry to speed up its work replacing the private dishes with shared, government-controlled systems. The Ministry reported to the president that the work had been completed in 25 residential buildings. It was also reviewing a tender for the supply of components needed for another 2,000 residential buildings. His report clarified that a total of four satellite dishes were to be mounted on each building to enable the reception of broadcasts from the Yamal 90 and Yamal 48 Russian satellites, the European Hotbird 13 satellite, and the Turkish Turksat satellite.

AFFECTED AREA STILL SMALL

16. (SBU) Local staff say that, so far, private dishes have been replaced on buildings primarily in the city center, especially along the main thoroughfare of Turkmenbashi Street and on some buildings in the Mir Region, located in the southeastern quarter of Ashgabat. Local staff say residents of these buildings with whom they have spoken report no change in their satellite access, including to Russian news stations. In some other areas of Ashgabat off main streets, residents have been able to relocate private satellite dishes to the roof or to the sides of buildings not visible from the street.

TECHNICALLY DIFFICULT

ASHGABAT 00000192 002 OF 002

17. (SBU) A local satellite service contractor, who does both private and government work, told an EmbOff he did not know how the government was going to carry out this work, given the technical complexities of splitting a satellite signal among as many as 50-100 apartments per building. A technical specialist at post who is familiar with the challenges of achieving satellite reception in Turkmenistan commented there are several ways to bring satellite reception to multiple residences from individual dishes, but each option comes with cost and complexity. If the authorities want to make this a standard across the country, it will be expensive and take considerable time. Local press reported that the Communications Ministry was purchasing sets of the technical equipment needed to implement this new cable-based satellite system only 50 at a time, suggesting the technology may be expensive.

18. (SBU) Post's technical specialist hypothesized about the way that the government may be undertaking the satellite conversion. The first option would envision four dishes on the roof, each with one receiver box and access card. The cable connection from each dish would then be split to accommodate all the residences in that building, but the quality of reception would suffer. Additional technology would have to be installed to allow residents to watch different channels concurrently. The government could control the content of satellite programming via the program packages it purchases from international satellite program providers. This would make satellite subscription access by Turkmenistan's citizens legal, but government service providers -- notoriously unresponsive to consumer needs -- would be responsible for repair and maintenance of the four receiver boxes, their access cards, and the dishes.

19. (SBU) A second option would have the four rooftop satellite dishes linked via cable to individual receivers in the residences. Residents would be able to insert or take out the access card, allowing them potentially to replace the government access card if they do not like the programming. This could continue the black market in satellite access cards. It is possible, however, that since the government

service-provider maintains the satellite dishes and connections to residences, it could also black out programs or channels it does not want received, making the card irrelevant.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: We see no evidence so far that this vast switch-over from private satellite dishes to a government-controlled cable system is an attempt to limit information. On the contrary, the government has announced citizens will now have access to about 500 global channels, which, if true, would be a remarkable opening of Turkmenistan's information space. It should be recalled that this enormous project originated when Berdimuhamedov, while being driven through Ashgabat, felt his aesthetic sense violated by the thousands of satellite dishes defacing the sides of every apartment building. Given the cost and complexity of this project, we suspect in the end it might be completed only along the main streets and boulevards. However, the government has raised public expectations with the promise of 500 satellite channels for every citizen -- sort of the electronic-age version of a chicken in every pot.

END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND